

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL THOMAS ATKIN,
COMMANDER, DEPLOYABLE OPERATIONS GROUP, U.S. COAST GUARD, VIA TELECONFERENCE
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning, sir. Welcome to the
Bloggers Roundtable. I'm Jack Holt with DOD New Media, and I got several folks
on the line, sir, and appreciate you joining us this morning.

On the line with us is Rear Admiral Thomas Atkin, who's the commander
of the Deployable Operations Group, the U.S. Coast Guard. Admiral Atkins (sic),
welcome. Thank you very much.

ADM. ATKIN: Thanks, Jack. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with
you and everybody else on the call. Do you want me to go ahead and -- with my
statement now, opening comments?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. ADM. ATKIN: Okay.

Yeah. With me today I have my command master chief, Darrick DeWitt.
He's the command master chief of the Deployable Operations Group and the command
master chief for all of the deployable specialized forces assigned to the Coast
Guard. He's also been at the point for me to lead this effort.

We're beginning an exciting new era in the Coast Guard, as we're
working with the Navy Special Warfare Command/Special Operations Command to
start assigning Coast Guard personnel to the SEAL training program, starting off
with BUDS through SEAL qualification, and then assignment to a SEAL team.

Certainly this is historic. It's different. But I think it's very
consistent with the long partnership we've had with the United States Navy,
stretching all the way back to our birth 218-plus years ago.

We have assigned Coast Guard personnel to Navy ships. We've assigned
Coast Guard personnel to Navy staffs. And likewise the Navy has assigned Navy
personnel to Coast Guard staffs, et cetera. So I think this is just another
step in the long partnership that we've had with the United States Navy.

It is important, however, to note that it's unique. The SEAL program
is one of the highest specialized programs in the world. They have a great
reputation, they have a great capability, and we understand that.

And we're going to try and find the best and brightest here within the Coast Guard to help support that program, work with the Navy, and they're going to be able to provide back to us here at the Coast Guard a great skill set and experiences that they're going to learn by going through the program.

We have 27 different units within the Deployable Operations Group, stretching from HAZMAT, environmental response capability, across the spectrum to a maritime counterterrorism unit at the high end.

We're excited about what we're doing. We think that this program is going to bring a lot of experience back into the Deployable Operations Group and the Coast Guard as a whole.

So with that, I'll open it up to any questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And Andrew, you were first on line. Why don't you get us started?

Q Admiral, good morning. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings and Get the Gouge. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

Sir, could you talk to us about how the Coasties are doing down with the SEALs? Are they -- have you had anybody complete the program yet? How far are they along in it?

ADM. ATKIN: Andrew, good question. We do not have anybody in the program at this time. The MOU was signed I want to say probably about a month ago. We put out what we call an ALCOAST which is a message to all hands to explain to them that the MOU was signed.

We just sent out a solicitation message to begin soliciting volunteers. So we've established some criteria. We expect all the volunteers' input to be in the end of this month or early next month. At that point, we'll go through an assessment and selection process, working with the Navy Special Warfare Command. We expect the enlisted members to go to pre-BUDS training in the Great Lakes in the December time frame and then all the folks to go to start BUDS in the February time frame of 2009. So at this point, we don't have anybody in the SEAL program. We're just starting the process off. We've gotten a tremendous amount of positive anecdotal comments from folks that they're very interesting in what we're doing. They're excited about what we're doing and we expect a pretty robust group of folks applying to attend BUDS and then move on into the SEAL teams.

Q Great. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jonas.

Q Hi. This is Jonas Hogg with the News Herald. I'm the Ball Gunner. How are you doing today?

ADM. ATKIN: Good, Jonas. How are you?

Q I'm doing great. My question sort of goes to mission creep. What is going to be the safeguard to keep Department of Homeland Security saying, hey, we've got all these guys with this tremendous training; why not use

this outside a purely military sort of operation scheme? I mean, essentially, what's going to keep this strictly in the military and outside of Homeland Security, which is where you guys are anchored?

ADM. ATKIN: Well, you know, we're both a Title 14 and a Title 10 service. In other words, we're both a military service and a law enforcement service at the same time at all times. We wear both hats and we've worn them -- both hats -- for 218 years. So within the Coast Guard, we've always been participating in military operations as well as law enforcement operations.

I really -- this is not really mission creep. We have a military mission. We have a counterterrorism mission. We have an anti-terrorism mission. And we also have a mission to conduct high-end specialized law enforcement operations both in the Caribbean, western Pacific -- or I should say eastern Pacific -- as well as around the homeland to protect our folks.

So what this does do is provides us better capability, increased competencies, more experience and greater knowledge to do the things that we're already doing today. You know -- so really, across DHS there are different forces that have high-end specialized law enforcement capability. We already are working with those folks.

So I don't see any mission creep. What I do see is better proficiency to do the things we're asking our folks to do.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Chuck?

Q Good morning, Admiral. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Drawing out a little bit more on the previous question and answer, Coast Guard has folks that have experience with dozens, if not hundreds of boarding missions. You've got folks that have done port security, home and abroad.

What kind of skills would field training bring to the Coast Guard? I obviously see the advantage to the Navy of having more SEALs. What would SEAL training bring to the Coast Guard that you don't already have? And how would you -- what kind of holes would that fill in?

ADM. ATKIN: Right now, Chuck, we have a Maritime Security Response Team, which is our counterterrorism unit. And they're based out of Chesapeake, Virginia.

And they conduct the high-end maritime missions both from a law enforcement perspective as well as from a counterterrorism perspective. They work closely already with the SEAL community.

What the folks coming back are going to provide for us is just a little better competency level. They're going to be more specialized. The other thing they're going to be able to bring back is a esprit de corps that you learn within the SEAL community. We don't always have that.

We have a great service. I'm very proud to wear the blue. But the esprit de corps that comes out of folks who go to BUDS, are members of SEAL teams, those folks -- that character, that mindset of when they'll be able to bring that back to our Maritime Security Response Team as well as all our tactical teams, our MSSTs, our Tactical Law Enforcements Teams, our Law Enforcement Detachments -- so they'll be able to bring that mindset back.

They'll be able to bring back the experiences they gain by going through BUDS, by going through the SEAL qualification training, by going -- being members of SEAL teams and working in the OCONUS environments. Those experiences, that knowledge, that mindset are all things that are going to benefit the Coast Guard in the long term.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Jim?

Q Good morning, Admiral. Jim Dalbow, with An Unofficial Coast Guard Blog.

ADM. ATKIN: Hi, Jim.

Q You were quoted in this week's Navy Times that it's a long-term partnership and we still have a lot of stuff to work out. What do you still have to work out? And do you anticipate any integration problems?

ADM. ATKIN: What we're working on, Jim, right now -- and actually, I'm getting a brief later this afternoon on just the whole accession process of -- once we get all the applicants' files in and how we're going to review them, how we're going to start the selection process, where the selection process is going to take place, who actually is part of that selection process by name, not just by billets. So those are some of the types of things we're still having to work out.

I think the major decisions are done. The fact that we're going to do it is good and done. So it's really the details. And as you know, devil's always in the details, but it's the detail work of having a step-by-step process to make sure that goes well, that we're getting the best-qualified candidates to attend BUDS and that we're given our best opportunity for success.

Q Thank you.

(Audio break.)

ADM. ATKIN: It's an interesting question. Let me back up first on the first part, Christian.

Q Okay.

ADM. ATKIN: And the bottom line is I wouldn't expect to have any applicants at this stage. So I -- you know, so if you get the word zero, don't expect -- don't look at that as a negative. Just look at that as the process is still evolving. And we're not expecting to get the applicants in till at least after the first of September.

Right now, the number of applicants -- the pool we're looking at is all 42,000 people within the Coast Guard, so -- well, I shouldn't say it that way -- everybody who meets the criteria by age, gender, et cetera. But it's open to those folks. I expect a pretty broad pool.

We have four slots to go to BUDS, and then they will become members of the SEAL teams. We expect to do that annually. So theoretically, as we work through this process -- and as you guys know, the BUDS program -- and I don't

want to speak for NAVSPECWARCOM, but the attrition rate is high. We would expect to have it at at least at a minimum of 28 folks within the SEAL teams at any one time as this program unfolds for the Coast Guard.

So it's about four per year -- two officers, two enlisted -- although I'm not going to stick to that exactly. I mean, if I have three great enlisted folks and only one officer candidate one year, then those are the four that go. So that's kind of how we're looking at it.

We want to be as flexible as we can to get the best qualified candidates to go to BUDS and then be members of the SEAL teams. My guess -- and again I can't speak for SOCOM or NAVSPECWARCOM -- the more folks that we can be willing to help them out with, the more folks they're willing to take.

Q Okay. And Jack, do you mind if I do one more follow up?

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Okay. And for Master Chief DeWitt, are you there on the line?

COMMAND MASTER CHIEF DARRICK DEWITT (Deployable Operations Group): I am, sir. Q Okay. So getting back to what the admiral said about the culture that the SEALs bring or could bring to the Coast Guard, you spent some time in the Rangers, right? And then you joined the Coast Guard and you spent a lot of time in the sort of tactical side of the Coast Guard with law enforcement and that sort of thing. So you know a little bit about the mentality of the Special Operations community.

The mentality of a Navy SEAL, to my knowledge, is very different than the mentality of a Coast Guardsman, even a Coast Guardsman doing tactical and law enforcement stuff. There's a very deep philosophical difference between, you know, overlooking at a ridge line in Afghanistan and boarding a ship in international waters and all of the rules and regulations that apply to that. I mean, do we -- do you -- do you, personally, really think that that is going to be compatible or more of a clash of cultures?

MKCM DEWITT: No, actually I think it's going to be very compatible. I think that the leadership that they bring to our community is going to be great. When we -- when you look at the way the Coast Guard's evolving, with our Maritime Security Response Teams, our MSSTs, bringing that type of a mentality and culture and understanding the operations is going to be great for our organization.

Q Okay. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And Bruce.

Q Admiral, Bruce McQuain, QandO. I wish I knew more about U.S. Coast Guard operations, so I could ask an intelligent question here. But you mentioned that you are the head of the Deployable Operations Group, and I'm -- I've gotten the idea that in fact these that come back from the SEAL teams will essentially be billeted within that group. Is that correct?

ADM. ATKIN: Yeah, Bruce. And you're not selling -- you're -- don't sell yourself short. That was a good question. (Chuckles.)

Yes. We're looking at -- once those folks come back from the SEAL teams, they would be assigned within the Deployable Operations Group somewhere. That's an issue we're still working on. The exact location, whether it'd be within our Training Command or our training elements or directly assigned to our Maritime Security Response Team in a leadership position or one of our other tactical teams in leadership positions -- we're still working those details out to find the best location where we can take full advantage of the skills and competencies that they bring back from the SEAL program.

Q Now, if I could follow up quickly, could you give us a little background or a little, you know, sort of the Readers' Digest version of what the maritime counterterrorism group is all about?

ADM. ATKIN: Well, the Maritime Security Response Team was established shortly after 9/11 in response to our requirements to conduct maritime counterterrorism in support of the country. We have a team that's based out of Chesapeake, Virginia. They are able to conduct the counterterrorism wherever they're required to be, based on the operational and tactical commander's request. They also support other DHS components, as well as the rest of the interagency. For instance, they are -- they will deploy in support of the Secret Service for National Special Security Events and provide the Secret Service a maritime component to conduct the maritime counterterrorism operations.

Q Thanks. MR. HOLT: Okay. And all right, do we have any follow-up questions on that?

Q Yes. I do.

Admiral, Andrew Lubin again from Get the Gouge.

Sir, there was an earlier question about mission creep. With some of your sailors finally coming back as SEALs, what's the possibility that Secretary Chertoff's going to grab them, put them down the border, down to Mexico?

ADM. ATKIN: I don't really see that as a threat. One, Secretary Chertoff won't be there by then, you know. (Chuckles.) That's seven years away.

Q Okay.

ADM. ATKIN: But no, I don't really see it as a threat. They're maritime experts, not land-based experts. Could the Coast Guard be supporting Border Patrol and what they do through a liaison program? Probably. Why not? Why can't the DHS components be more integrated and be more interoperable in what we do? I think that's the direction we would like to go, actually. We're -- if you look at the Department of Defense, the Joint Staff, the integrated and interoperability between the services, we need to go there as well.

We need to be more integrated. We need to be more interoperable with our DHS components.

So if we do become more integrated and we have some folks work in conjunction with CBP along the border, I think that's a good thing.

Q Okay. Great. Thank you.

Q Jack, I have a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Go ahead.

Q Okay. Admiral, sorry. I want to get back to the number of applicants that you have so far. Why would you not expect to have any right now? It's been out a month, and you said that by the end of this month or beginning of next month, you hope to make your selections, like -- it's only 15 days to go here.

ADM. ATKIN: Let me -- the guys are just handing me the actual message right now. We didn't send our message out until the 1st of August, which is two weeks ago. We're not expecting the applications to be back in to us until 15 September. So you know, we have about a month before the deadline is. And as you know, most folks -- just like they do in high school, college, they get a term paper, they're going to work on it, and they're going to turn it in around two days -- maybe the day, maybe the day of -- it's due.

Q Okay.

ADM. ATKIN: So what I expect folks to do is to be working on their application. They have to take a physical fitness test. They have to get -- they have to write some essays to support their package. They have to get a physical. So all that stuff takes time.

So given somebody who started exactly on the 1st of August, I think it's going to take a little bit more than two weeks to put their package together and get everything done, and that would be if they didn't have a full-time job. All these folks have full-time jobs. So that's why I'm not expecting much, really, until after the 1st of September.

Q Admiral, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Let me -- you know, all these questions have been what the SEAL team can bring to the Coast Guard. I'm just wondering what this brings to the Navy, what sort of added value does having Coast Guard -- Coast Guardsmen on SEAL teams bring to the Navy? For example, do they still maintain the law enforcement function when they go to the SEAL teams?

ADM. ATKIN: Well, it's a great question, Jim. The Coast Guard men that are going to be part of the SEAL teams bring their experiences and their knowledge base of Coast Guard operations, law enforcement operations, port security operations, homeland security to the SEAL teams. Those are experiences that those folks don't have. So it's -- as you know, the more diverse operational group you have to work with, with a more broad variety of experiences, the better you're going to be. Doesn't mean that the SEAL teams are going to conduct any law enforcement operations, but understanding how law enforcement operations work, understanding the experiences that person brings to the team will only make them better.

So you know, we bring those kind of experiences to the SEAL teams. And we're also bringing great men that can meet the SEAL requirements and make the SEAL teams stronger and better, through our experiences and just through our own perseverance. So you know, I think, that's a piece.

The question with regard to a Coast Guard petty officer or a Coast Guard officer, they always have their law enforcement authorities by law.

Enacting and operating under those law enforcement authorities is a whole different issue. And so operating under the Navy tactical control, those members would not be able to exercise any law enforcement authority while members of the SEAL teams.

Q Great. And could I just ask, at its mature level, I think, you said 28 before. Is that how many? Is that the mature level or, I guess, the total operational capability you want?

ADM. ATKIN: Well, great way you worded that question: what I want and what we're going to do. (Laughter.)

They -- this is the way I'd look at it, is we're looking at about four per year, to go into the program. The first group that will come back to us will be approximately seven years from now. So I just said four times seven. That's about 28 folks in the program, before we get our first batch back to the Coast Guard.

So could we want more? I think that we have to take a look at that down the road and see how the program's going and see how it's going to benefit the Coast Guard and benefit the Navy. If we want to, grow it; maybe we want to pare it down. We have to look at that down the road. I would say we probably shouldn't look at that until we're past the five-year point.

But that's where I got my 28 from; not a huge chunk of the Coast Guard, if you look at it from the fact that we have over 42,000 active-duty folks now plus an additional 8,100 reserve folks.

Q That was one of the questions. This will be open to the reserves too.

ADM. ATKIN: Good question. I don't think we've excluded them. But certainly in order for them to become members and go through the training, they would have to come on active duty. Q And one final thing and I'm sorry.

Are you going to have Coast Guard officers or enlisted folks in the SEAL team leadership from the start, I mean, looking out after your guys, as they move forward?

ADM. ATKIN: Well, you know, I wouldn't say from the start. Any time you're placed in a leadership position, you have to earn that trust.

So you know, part of it's being in the military culture. Part of it's based on rank and part of it's based on competency. And part of it's based on capability and trust.

So I think those are decisions that are going to rest with Navy Special Warfare Command and the Special Operations Command. They're not going to rest with me.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Jack, Jim Dolbow with Unofficial Coast Guard Blog.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jim?

Q Admiral, on the flip side, the Navy commissioned its first SEALs in 1962. Why did this partnership take so long to initiate?

ADM. ATKIN: You know, I can't answer that. I can -- I don't know if we ever tried it before. I don't know if we ever thought of it before. So I really can't answer that question. What I can tell you is how we look at it today, you know, which we've talked about, I think, pretty extensively on the call.

And it's something that came up about a year ago. And we said, why not? This makes sense. This is the best way we help support the nation, both from our Title 10 and our Title 14 hat. It makes sense from the maritime strategy where we have -- the maritime strategy signed out by the CNO, the commandant of the Marine Corps and the commandant of the Coast Guard, where we want to be more integrated and more interoperable.

So the timing is right for what we need to do as a nation in this new world order in which we're operating. So I can't tell you why we haven't done it in the past, but it makes sense for today.

Q And a quick follow-up --

ADM. ATKIN: Okay.

Q -- for you and the master chief. Do you both wish you were under the age of 29?

MKCM DEWITT: (Laughs.)

ADM. ATKIN: I'll speak for me. I'll let -- I think he could still qualify. He kicks my butt all the time out there when we're working out.

You know, I had the opportunity to work with SEALs back in the early '80s, when I would fit in to the timeline. I think it would have been a great opportunity. I would have loved to have the opportunity to try. I don't know if physically I would have made it, but I would have liked to have the opportunity.

Master Chief? MKCM DEWITT: You know, I had my years in a Ranger battalion. And, you know, those years are always going to be special to me. But, you know, I think it's a great opportunity for these young kids to go through. So I had my chance, loved every minute of it. And now I'm looking forward to seeing these young kids get the opportunity.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And well, we -- also on the line we had Lieutenant Commander Christian Dunbar from the Navy Special Warfare Center. Commander, do you have anything to add? Any other -- any comments?

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER CHRISTIAN DUNBAR (director of training, Navy Special Warfare Center): Actually, you know what? I think this is a really interesting time in our history. This is a great opportunity for the Navy and especially the center here and the SEAL teams.

You know, I was previously an XO with SEAL team, and I can tell you that it doesn't matter who comes through training. Once they come out the other end, everybody kind of has the same goals, the vision, teamwork, camaraderie and capabilities.

And we're excited in the opportunity to train what I consider a more highly selected and qualified candidate. And what we see here at the center is that those candidates have a higher rate of success. And so the fact that the Coast Guard is doing their own selection is certainly going to set them up for success for us in the long term.

One comment I would like to make regarding the long-term growth of about 28 personnel into the SEAL teams is that you've got to put that a little bit into perspective. And what that means to us is approximately two SEAL platoons. The growth of two SEAL platoons from outside of the Navy -- and I don't mean to connote that these are going to be all Coast Guard-manned platoons, that's not the case at all, but the manning numbers means that we can grow considerably, achieving the CNO's objectives and the secretary of Defense's objective over the next seven years. And this just adds a greater base of qualified candidates that don't come from recruits in the Navy or come from the fleet.

And I think that's one of the things I would like to just comment on, is the Coast Guard has done a great job identifying that they can assist us in our growth requirements, and then it's a win-win for everybody.

That's all I've got, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

Q Lieutenant Commander Dunbar, could you give us your full name and title?

LT. CMDR. DUNBAR: Yes. I'm Lieutenant Commander Christian Dunbar. I'm the director of training at the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado, California.

Q Okay, great. Thanks a lot.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Admiral, do you have any closing thoughts for us?

ADM. ATKIN: You know, I think, Jack, I hit them all. So I really don't have anything else to add.

It's been a great conversation. I'd love to do it again any time. I think this is marking some history, not only for the Coast Guard, for the Navy, but for our nation as we continue to move forward in response to supporting the people of the United States.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. We appreciate you joining us. We look forward to having you back. We'll set something up a little farther down the line, see how things are going. We appreciate you being with us, sir. ADM. ATKIN: Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, sir.

Q Great, Admiral, thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you, Admiral.

END.